

An Essay  
On the use of  
Ergot in Parturition.  
Respectfully Submitted to the  
Faculty  
of the  
Homoeopathic Medical College  
of  
Pennsylvania.

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## On the use of Ergot in Parturition.

According to the regulations of the Homoeopathic Medical College, a candidate for graduation, is required to write a thesis, on some medical subject, composed by himself, and in his own hand-writing, to be delivered to the Dean, and be submitted to the inspection of the Faculty. In compliance with this request I have chosen mine, On the use of Ergot in Parturition.

In this too much must not be expected of me, for I do not expect to promulgate any new ideas or important facts, but to state in as few words as possible, the opinions and views I have formed of its use and abuse in the Allopathic practice, from what I have read and been able to learn of its first use by old

women, to the present time; being a student and not having any practical knowledge of this drug, I have quoted the best Allopathic authorities, to support me in my opinions.

I will now state the order in which it shall be treated.

- <sup>1st</sup> Firstly. What Ergot is.
- <sup>2nd</sup> Secondly. The different methods of preparing it, and the doses administered.
- <sup>3rd</sup> Thirdly. Its history.
- <sup>4th</sup> Fourthly. Its use according to Allopathic writers.
- <sup>5th</sup> Fifthly. Its dangers and abuses.
- <sup>6th</sup> Sixthly. The circumstances under which it can be used beneficially.

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<sup>1st</sup> 1. What is Ergot.

Botanists have been much divided in opinion in regard

to the nature and formation of ergot. Otto von Münchhausen, Schrank, De Candolle and others regard ergot, as a fungus growing between the glumes of grasses in the place of the ovary. Some regard ergot as a diseased condition of the ovary or seed. Leveillé, Phillipar, Smith and Duckett, state that ergot is a disease of the grain caused by the presence of a parasitical fungus, this last appears to be the true cause.

When we examine a number of ears of ergotized rye, we find that the number of grains in each spike which have become ergotized varies considerably; there may be one only, or the ear may be covered with them. Usually, the number is from three to ten.

The mature ergot projects considerably beyond the paleae. It has a violet-black color, and presents scarcely any filaments and sporidia. The spurred eye, or ergot of commerce, consists of grains which vary in length from a few lines to an inch, or even an inch and a half, and whose breadth is from half a line to four lines. Their form is cylindrical or, obscurely triangular, with obtuse angles, tapering at the extremities (fusiform), curved like the spur of a cock, unequally furrowed on two sides, often irregularly cracked and fissured.

The odour of a single grain is not detectable, but of a large quantity is fishy, peculiar, and nauseous. The taste is not very marked, but is disagreeable, and very slightly acid.

The grains are externally purplish-brown or black, more or less covered by a bloom, moderately brittle, the fractured surface being tolerably smooth, and whitish or purplish-white.

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2<sup>nd</sup>. The different methods of preparing it, and the doses administered.

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Ergot has been used in different preparations, there are seven mentioned by Pereira viz.  
 First. Pulvis Ergotae. This powder is only to be prepared when required for use. The dose of it, for a woman in labour, is twenty grains, to be repeated at intervals of half an hour for three times.

Second, Infusium Ergotae;— Ergot in coarse powder, ʒij; Boiling Water ℥ʒix. Infuse for

one hour, in a covered vessel, and strain. The product should measure about eight ounces. The dose is ℥ ʒij, to be repeated at intervals of half an hour or an hour.

Third. *Tinctura Ergotae*.—Ergot in coarse powder, ʒvii; Proof Spirit Oij. Macerate for fourteen days, strain, express, and filter. Five fluidrachms of this tincture contain one drachm of ergot. Dose ʒj to ʒiij.

Fourth. *Tinctura Ergotae Aetherea*.—Ergot, bruised, ʒxv; Ether Oij. Macerate for seven days; then express and strain. The dose is a teaspoonful.

Fifth. *Vinum Ergotae*.—Ergot, bruised, two ounces; White Wine a pint. Macerate for fourteen days, with occasional agitation; then express and filter through paper.

Dose, ℥ ʒj, or ℥ ʒij.

Sixth. *Uleum Ergotae*.—Is obtained by

submitting the ethereal tincture of ergot to evaporation by a very gentle heat. Its colour is reddish brown, Dose, from 20 to 50 drops.

Seventh. *Extractum Ergotae*.— This is prepared by exhausting ergot of rye by means of water, and evaporating the liquor to the consistence of syrup. To this extract is to be added a considerable excess of alcohol, by which all the gummy matters and salts insoluble in alcohol are precipitated. The supernatant liquor is to be decanted and reduced in a water bath to the consistence of a soft extract. The dose of this is from five to ten grains.

3rd.

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### *Its history.*

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The ergoted rye seems to have been used from time

immemorial by the old women, and by some country midwives, for the purpose of hastening delivery; and it appears to have been known for a long period in Germany, under the names of Eye of the Womb, Brockenmütter, Weisser Korn &c, and to have entered into the composition of various nostrums for hastening delivery.

Pereira states, that Camerarius in his *Actes des Curieux de la Nature*, for the year 1668. Mentions that, it was a popular remedy in Germany for accelerating parturition. In Italy and <sup>the</sup> France, it appears to have been long in use.

At last the vulgar traditions of this Empirical remedy or agent, attracted the attention of the prof-

ession, and Desgranges, published his first researches upon the Oxytocic properties of the ergoted rye, in the Gazette de Santé, for the year 1777. Since that period numerous observations, have been collected and published in the American, English, and French journals.

Dr Stearns, of the United States, has the credit of having first introduced ergot of rye into this country, about the year 1808, as an agent specifically exciting uterine contractions. In 1814, a paper was published by Prescott, on the effects of it in exciting labour-pains, and in uterine hemorrhage. It was not employed in England until 1824.

Desormeaux, Lachappelle, Beclard, Jackson, Hall and others, deny that it has any effect at all; on the

Other hand, Stearns, Chapman, Prescott, Boudot, Chevernil, Gendrin, Bigeschi, Luroth, Davis, Blundell, Sewel, Smith, and many others; assert, that, it is both effective and beneficial in hastening delivery.

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4<sup>th</sup>. Its uses according to allopathic practitioners. —

It has been given by the old practitioners, under the following circumstances, viz, for the purpose of effecting uterine contractions when labour has actually commenced; of increasing the expulsive efforts of the womb in protracted or lingering labours; of hastening delivery when the life of the patient is endangered by some alarming symptoms, such as

haemorrhage, convulsions, neuralgic pains, faintings &c; of expelling the placenta when its retention depends on a want of contraction in the uterus; also of provoking the expulsion of sanguineous clots, hydatids, and polypi; of restraining uterine haemorrhage, whether puerperal or non puerperal; of provoking abortion and when this process has already commenced, of promoting it when accompanied by haemorrhage.

Later authorities have modified the use of this drug in a great measure. Churchill says, that ergot of rye may be tried,  
 1<sup>st</sup>, when the pains are feeble and inefficient without especial causes;  
 2<sup>nd</sup>, if the os uteri be soft and dilatable;  
 3<sup>rd</sup>, if there be no obstacle to a natural

Delivery;

- 4<sup>th</sup>, if the head or breech present and be sufficiently advanced;
- 5<sup>th</sup>, if there be no threatening head symptoms, nor excessive general debility.

On the other hand it

should not be given,

- 1<sup>st</sup>, if the os uteri be hard and rigid;
- 2<sup>nd</sup>, if the presentation be beyond reach;
- 3<sup>rd</sup>, if there be a Breech presentation;
- 4<sup>th</sup>, if the pelvis be deformed;
- 5<sup>th</sup>, if there be any serious obstacle to delivery in the soft parts;
- 6<sup>th</sup>, if there be head symptoms or much general irritation.

Some argue that it

should not be given in first labours, on account of the parts being in a state of rigidity or non dilatation, which

require hours and hours of very gradual and remitting efforts to dilate, and which in the majority of cases will be done, very effectually and carefully by the sole forces of Nature.

Meigs, states that, he rarely gives ergot as an expulsive agent, but chiefly employs it at the moment of, or just before the birth of the child, in order to secure if possible a permanent or tonic contraction of the womb, after labour, in women, who are known to have been subject to alarming hæmorrhages, in their preceding labors; he says that, in a case of a feeble and exhausted patient, with relaxed and weak tissue, whose labor is lingering merely from a want of power, and not from unnatural resistance, ergot

can be given at almost any stage of the labor; but in a woman in good health, whose labor is slow for a want of rotation of the head, or rendered lingering by rigidity of the os uteri, vagina, perineum, or vulva or excessive relative magnitude of the head, the greatest degree of consideration should, before resorting to the ergot, be given to the whole case in order to decide which is preferable, the Secale, or the forceps.

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### 5th. Its dangers and abuses.

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From the first introduction of this empirical drug into the Allopathic Materia Medica, its dangerous and pernicious qualities, have been the object of much controversy

among physicians.

Our later authorities, especially Meigs, Churchill, F. H. Ham-  
sham and many others admit, that,  
they have never used it, but with fear  
and trembling, and from what I can  
learn, they regard its effects on the  
uterus and appendages, the general  
health of the female, and the life of  
the child as dangerous.

In natural labor  
according to the beneficent law of Divine  
economy, the pains are short, and in-  
termitting, not lasting longer than from  
thirty seconds to two minutes in general,  
and returning according to the stage of the  
labor, every twenty five, twenty, fifteen,  
ten, five, or even three minutes; during  
such pains the life of the foetus is safe,

as soon as the contraction of the uterus  
 over, it lies in the womb, free from  
 all pressure, and the placenta, which  
 had been violently compressed between  
 the womb and child, recovers its cir-  
 culation and continues to perform  
 all its important offices during the  
 absence of pains.

Now let us look at the  
 consequences of administering ergot  
 in a full dose. It produces an unin-  
 terrupted contraction or tonic spasm  
 of the fibres of the womb, called ergotism,  
 which when once begun does not cease  
 until the child is born, or until the  
 womb has passed with all its irritability  
 from sheer exhaustion; this contraction  
 or pain may last from twenty minutes  
 to half an hour.

It is universally acknowledged, that, when a woman is pregnant, she is more susceptible to the action of medicinal agents, than at any other time. This being admitted, I argue, that ergot ought not to be administered in a large dose, on account of the danger of exciting such an unrelenting ergotic pain, which when once excited grasps the uterus with its powerful hands, contracting, crushing, and never yielding until it has forced all out, at the risk of rupturing the womb, tearing off all connection between it and the vagina, and forcing the foetus into the abdomen and causing the death, both of the mother and child; or of lacerating the perineum and soft parts, all of which have happened. Again if the placenta and cord are so violently

compressed for twenty or thirty minutes by the incessant contraction of the uterus; can the placenta perform its proper functions? I think not, because this permanent contraction of the uterus either detaches the placenta, or so compresses it as to destroy its functions before the child is in a situation to respire. The appearance of the children under these circumstances confirms this view.

Large doses of ergot have produced, mania, rage, violence also suicidal mania, and to substantiate this, I will give an extract from Dr Crozier's work on obstetrics.

He relates that Dr — gave half an ounce of ergot to a woman in labor; delivery took place.

some minutes after, but with a complete rupture of the perineum. The child was born stiff and dead, and the mother eight or ten days after committed suicide by throwing herself from a window. I saw another case of a woman in the Rue Cadet, who also precipitated herself from a window, eight days after a labor which had been excited by an Allopathic dose of Ergot.

Another of the many abuses of ergot is, that many physicians when called to attend a case of labor, and on examination find that it is progressing slowly but surely, without any bad symptoms, have not the patience to wait on Nature's efforts, and aid them when necessary, but to save both time and money; resort to this

drug in large doses, to hasten labor, and so often blindly risk the life of the patient and child for want of the proper amount of patience.

I will now relate a few circumstances of a case which happened near Pittsburgh.

Dr. Loudet, Homoeopathist, was attending a patient in labor, and wanting counsel called in Dr. Hoffman Homoeopathist, they were with her I think nearly seventy two hours, had tried to deliver <sup>with</sup> forceps, but failed owing to the Antero-posterior diameter of the brim being too small, from the projection of the promontory of the Sacrum; they decided that Craniotomy was the only chance for the mother, they left stating that they would return, after two or

three hours rest, and perform the operation. During their absence Dr Gross, Allopathist, was called in, and immediately administered a gross dose of ergot, the effects of which in about half an hour caused the rupture of the womb, and death of the woman. An inquest was held and Drs Londelet and Hoffman, were indicted for Malpractice. Their trial came off, the jury were charged, and sent to their room, and "Mirabile dictu", in about thirty six hours, that wise and intelligent body, sent in word that they could not agree, and stood, five in favour of Homoeopathy, and seven for Allopathy, they had left the testimony, and were arguing the respective merits of both systems. I consider that Dr Gross, caused the death of the patient,

by rashly administering a large dose of ergot, without making the proper examinations.

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6<sup>th</sup>. The circumstances under which it may be used beneficially.

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<sup>now</sup> From the foregoing it will be seen that there are many dangers attending the use of ergot in large doses during parturition; that it has been and still is, often given by Allopathic practitioners, to save time and money, without any regard to the safety of the mother or child; and moreover that authors differ in regard to the circumstances in which it should be used, thereby showing that they have no fixed law

by which they administer it, being really in no better predicament than the old women from whom they first learned its use. It now becomes my duty to show that ergot may be used safely and beneficially, and in what circumstances this may be done, and that there is a fixed law, which will guide us in using this, as well as all other remedies.

Without entering into any account of the many indications of the law here referred to, found in the writings of many of our most eminent practitioners, I will merely state that after a great number of rigid experiments with drugs on himself and others, Dr. Samuel Hahnemann of Germany, who is generally

acknowledged as the founder of the Medical System called Homoeopathy, promulgated the doctrine, that those medicines ought to be given in disease which cause symptoms in the healthy similar to the disease, or as expressed in the old Latin formula, "Similia Similibus Curantur". <sup>My</sup> From experience of cures performed by Homoeopathic practitioners, and from personal trial of medicine in cases of disease, I have become thoroughly convinced of the truth of this law, and would only use and recommend the use of Ergot in cases where there are symptoms present which are similar to those produced by Ergot on the healthy. Although this remedy has been but imperfectly tried by Homoeopathic practitioners,

still we have many good symptoms  
 collected from cases of poisonings, as  
 well as from trials on the healthy.  
 From these sources the following  
 symptoms from Sabe's Symptomen  
 Codex of Homoeopathic Materia Medica,  
 which may occur before, in, and  
 after labor, are given, viz, The skin  
 looks lead colored. - Formication. - Com-  
 vulsion with delirium and starting. -  
 Small and suppressed pulse. - Lowness  
 of spirits. - Dread of death. - Mania. -  
 Rage. - Violence. - Thirst with dilatation  
 of the pupils. - Spasmodic contraction of  
 the eyes. - Gause before the eyes. - Humming  
 and roaring in ears. - Wretched complexion.  
 Heat and contractive pain in stomach. -  
 Nausea and vomiting. - Great feeling  
 of coldness in back and abdomen. -

Distention of the abdomen. - Congestion of blood to the uterus. - Metrorrhagia. - Mole. - Polypus in the uterus. - Affections of pregnant and parturient females. - Excessive uterine contractions, so that the uterus seems to burst. - Suppression of the lochia. - Violent palpitation of the heart with contracted and frequently intermittent pulse. - Stiffness of nape of the neck. - Spasms and convulsions of the extremities. - Rigidity of the limbs. - Paralysis of the limbs. -

Iahr in his Diseases of Women, states that Ergot may be used in threatened miscarriage, where the uterus is organically diseased; or for deficient vitality of the womb, in females of a feeble, exhausted and cachectic condition, with disposition

to passive haemorrhage or convulsions; pale and earthy complexion; pulse small and almost extinguished; uneasiness and fear of death; profuse discharge of of dark and thin blood, this remedy will facilitate the expulsion of the foetus, if it cannot be avoided. Again that it is particularly suitable to puerle and cachectic women, or such as become exhausted by haemorrhage, caused by adhesion of the placenta, inertia of the womb, insufficient uterine contraction, leaving the mouths of the vessels open.

Noack and Frinks, in their Clinical observations, state; that, it is used for; The expulsion of moles, polypi and other adventitious growths in the uterus. For eclampsia of parturient

females. Inordinate labor pains. Deficiency of labor pains. The after pains last too long and are painful. Distension of the uterus with discharge of blood.

Above I have given a few of the symptoms indicating the use of Ergot, and as regards the dose I will say nothing supposing that no Homoeopathic physician, would give more than the emergency of the case demanded.

Having now fulfilled my task to the best of my abilities, I will conclude by hoping, that, my feeble efforts may meet with the approbation of the Faculty.